



DIGRESSION

Notes from Veritas 2003

Jonathan Spencer Jones, Emma Buchanan

Notwithstanding the plethora of wine competitions in South Africa today, Veritas, now in its 13th year, is still widely regarded as the most important, and the seals that appear on winning wines are familiar to most wine drinkers.

This year's awards attracted a record 1 578 entries, of which more than two-thirds (1 149 wines) received awards — 75 double gold, 80 gold, 364 silver and 630 bronze. Only the double gold (DG) and gold (G) winners are represented at the public tasting, and even that is an awful lot of wines to try to make sense of. Thus the decision to concentrate on a few selected cultivars and wines, beginning with the sole DG Cap Classique (champagne style), the Villiera Monro Premier Cuvée Brut (1997) — fresh, creamy and bubbly but disappointingly short.

The whites

Despite the undeniable thrill of tasting wine that must cost R10 or so a sip, it's both worthwhile and interesting to concentrate on value for money in this section. Last year unwooded chenin blanc provided fantastic value, with close neighbours Perdeberg, Simonsvlei and Wellington all scoring DG — the Perdeberg for example cost just over R10 a bottle (and sold out a couple of weeks after the tasting). This year we were disappointed to find only one wine in this category on display, Cedarberg 2003, DG but we thought perhaps a little overpriced at R36.50. Perdeberg had scored with their 2003 colombar this time — both a DG and a great price, but alas at the time of writing they had sold out yet again. Boland won DG for their 2003 wooded chardonnay, which should also be excellent value when it is released this month. The 2003 that appeared on the shelves earlier in the year is delicious but a different batch, so doesn't feature those little gold stickers — it's R22 a bottle from the cellar. The Boland stand was unable to give us a price for the DG one (they were apparently still battling over how much to increase it by, but we were confidently told that 'knowing Boland, it won't go up by much'). A lovely white blend at a good price (and in an exquisite pale sea-green bottle) was Arniston Bay unwooded chenin blanc/chardonnay (G), well worth trying at about R25.

It was interesting to note that while there was a good showing of top awards for wooded chardonnays and unwooded sauvignon blancs, in other white wine categories Veritas had been rather *snoep*. There were for example no golds or double golds for gewürztraminer, unwooded semillon or 'other cultivars' (including Cape riesling), and only one each for weisser riesling (Hartenberg 2002), wooded semillon (Cape Point 2002) and wooded sauvignon blanc (KWV Reserve 2003). We wondered whether this reflected fashion or lapses in quality.

Jonathan is ex-News Editor and Emma currently Assistant Editor, SAMJ.

The reds

Red blends dominated the DGs and these can be quite varied, given the different combinations that are made. Much of the current debate is around a 'Cape blend', and the Simonsig Frans Malan Reserve (2000), dominated by pinotage (60%) with cabernet sauvignon (30%) and a touch of merlot (10%), must be a contender. Showing good fruit and balance, it will benefit from more time in the bottle to soften up. Wines in this category tend of course to be pricey, and a relatively good buy would be the absolutely delicious 2001 Overgaauw shiraz/cab (DG) at R54.

In turn Shiraz dominated the golds, receiving no less than 22 awards (which with its 8 double golds made it the best performing cultivar overall), and this would suggest a good understanding of this grape. But it would also appear to reflect a certain 'sameness', with the examples we tried all showing the typical spicy characteristics of the grape but ultimately none standing out above the others.

A wine that did stand out in its category was the DG Hartenberg merlot (2001/2000), with its lavender whiffs on the nose and chewy toffee backdrop to the fruit on the palate. And if you are looking for value for money, try the 2002 Bovlei merlot (G) at R30 a bottle from the farm.

We are always on the lookout for the unusual, and the DG Nederburg malbec (2001) — sole example of this cultivar on display — was tried with enthusiasm, but smoky overtones notwithstanding, disappointed with its lack of depth.

Fairview covered itself with glory at Veritas, with a chestful of five golds and double golds. Given the huge volume and range they produce (Fairview is the antithesis of the boutiquey, 'we only do one thing so that we can do it really well' winery), this achievement is pretty phenomenal.

Packaging makes an ever-increasing impression these days, with more and more unusually shaped and coloured bottles and gorgeous labels — a feast for the eye, but sad to think that the consumer is ultimately the one who pays for it.

A closer look at the Veritas booklet proved interesting. Veritas stresses that its judges include overseas experts, 'to serve as a sounding board for international standards'. There were seven of them — a British wine master, an Irish wine writer, an Aussie horticultural research officer, and no less than four Swedes, all wine buyers or importers of various sorts. Why *four* Swedes? One doesn't doubt their expertise, but their judgement must to some extent be influenced by the consumers they are buying for. Why should South African wines be judged according to the Swedish palate? Don't the Swedes drink aquavit?

All in all the tasting was a mixed but ultimately most enjoyable experience, with bargains to be found, particularly among the whites.